

Hailey

A study in British imperialism,
1872–1969

JOHN W. CELL



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Contents

<i>List of abbreviations</i>	page viii
<i>Glossary of foreign words</i>	ix
<i>Preface</i>	xi
1 Early life	1
2 Colonization officer, 1901–1906	13
3 From Sargodha to Delhi, 1907–1912	32
4 Chief commissioner of Delhi, 1912–1918	42
5 A report on the Punjab	60
6 Finance member, 1919–1922	73
7 Home member, 1922–1924	92
8 Governor of the Punjab: the Sikhs, 1924–1925	107
9 Governor of the Punjab: the communal problem, 1924–1926	128
10 Governor of the Punjab: the communal problem, 1927–1928	141
11 Governor of the United Provinces, 1928–1930	155
12 Governor of the United Provinces: civil disobedience and Round Table Conference, 1930–1931	168
13 Governor of the United Provinces: 1931, year of crisis	180
14 Governor of the United Provinces: winding down, 1932–1934	199
15 Surveyor of Africa, 1935–1939	215
16 Two missions to Africa, 1939–1940	241
17 A report and a vision, 1941–1942	254
18 Adviser and propagandist, 1942–1945	266
19 Indian partition and the onset of African decolonization, 1945–1949	282
20 Defender of the faith, 1949–1969	295
<i>Bibliography</i>	306
<i>Index</i>	322

Early life

William Malcolm Hailey was born in 1872 at Newport Pagnell, a small town in north Buckinghamshire, the third son of Hammett Hailey, a country doctor who died when Malcolm was nine. His mother, Maria Coelia Clode, was from a family long established in the City of London, where her brother, John, had served as president of the Merchant Taylors' Company. All three Hailey brothers attended the Merchant Taylors' School. The eldest, Hammett (b. 1869), who was called by his initials, H.R.C., preceded Malcolm to Oxford and into the Indian Civil Service (ICS), serving in the land and revenue departments of the United Provinces (UP), where his more distinguished younger brother would one day retire as governor. Hammett's son, Peter, also joined the ICS. Malcolm's second brother, Rupert (b. 1870), was sent down after only four years at school and eventually became manager of a gold field in the northern Celebes. A younger sister, Violet, was the only one of Malcolm's siblings who survived him. Although they were late arrivals compared with the Stracheys or the Butlers, for instance, the Haileys were becoming an established Anglo-Indian family. Even the black sheep went overseas.¹

Merchant Taylors', which Malcolm attended from 1883 to 1890, had been founded by the company of the same name in 1561 as a quasi-charitable institution. By the nineteenth century, however, the company had become vestigial and the school was supported by the Corporation of the City of London. It occupied a site recently vacated by the more prestigious Charterhouse across from the Smithfield meat market near Ludgate Circus at the foot of Fleet Street. Although it possessed an old closed-scholarship link with St. John's College, Oxford, and a reputation for the quality of its education, it was and remains one of England's lesser public schools. As Hailey explained at a reunion in the 1950s, boys went there because their parents could not afford Eton or Harrow.² Because most students, like Malcolm himself, were day pupils on

¹ Biographical information drawn from Philip Mason's essay in the 1961-70 Supplement to the *Dictionary of National Biography*; *Who Was Who* (1961-70); GEC, *Complete Peerage*, 13:569; Frederic Boase, *Modern British Biography*. A sketch of Newport Pagnell is in the *Victoria County History*, *Buckinghamshire* (London, 1927), 4:409-22.

² Transcript of speech, 11 December 1957, HPA/343. *Merchant Taylors' School: Its Origin, History and Present Surroundings* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1929); E. P. Hart, *Merchant Taylors' School Register, 1561-1934*, 2 vols. (London: Merchant Taylors' School, 1936).

Hailey: a study in British imperialism

at least partial scholarship, the school was comparatively slow in building a corporate identity. Cricket and rugby teams, as well as the alumni magazine, *The Taylorian*, were established only in the 1870s. Although the curriculum was changing gradually – by the time Malcolm arrived French was required and German could be substituted for Greek – it was still predominantly classical, with mathematics but, of course, no natural science.

Hailey therefore received a standard Victorian classical education. It was supposed to shape both mind and character. As a Merchant Taylors' headmaster put it later, Latin especially provided not only mental but moral discipline through the immersion of young minds in the exemplary literature of a great imperial race.³ Associated with educators like Thomas Arnold at Rugby, Mark Pattison at Oxford, and John Seely at Cambridge, the training was intended not for technical specialists in business or industry but for administrators – that is, for precisely the sort of man Malcolm Hailey would become.⁴ He excelled in it, taking top prize for his English essay, being recognized in the Tercentenary Scholarship competition, and winning an open scholarship to Corpus Christi College, Oxford. He succeeded at university too, taking a first-class degree in classics in 1894. That year, apparently without the common recourse to a crammer, he came third in the Indian Civil Service examinations.⁵

Apart from his obvious brightness only a few facts are available about the kind of boy Malcolm was. He belonged to the Church of England and, he testified late in life, had once been deeply religious. *The Taylorian* mentioned him for theatricals and debates – a successful portrayal of Dr. Pangloss in scenes from George Colman's popular play *Heir-at-Law*, a spirited but unsuccessful argument for a resolution in support of the Irish Home Rule leader Charles S. Parnell – but not for organized sports. Apart from tennis, which he joked that he kept to a minimum out of regard for the feelings of his partners, his main recreations were fishing and hiking: both solo. Among his siblings he corresponded only with H.R.C., and there the linkage was largely professional. Even by Victorian standards the Hailey household may have been unusually cold and reserved. The death of the father deprived the sons of a male role model and the natural focus of formative adolescent conflicts, which would necessarily have been transferred to the mother. The obsessive-compulsive personality of the adult man – the fixation on work, the acute need to prove himself long after by all objective criteria he had accomplished every conceivable

³ J. Arbuthnot Nairn, *Latin Prose Competition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1928), p. viii.

⁴ There is a huge literature on Victorian education. See particularly J. R. de S. Honey, *Tom Brown's Universe: The Development of the English Public School in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Quadrangle, 1977); John Sparrow, *Mark Pattison and the Idea of a University* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967); and Sheldon Rothblatt, *The Revolution of the Dons: Cambridge and Society in Victorian England* (New York: Basic Books, 1968).

⁵ *Oxford University Calendar*. See also the standard history of the college by its president, Thomas Fowler, *Corpus Christi* (London: Robinson, 1898), although it has very little information on the modern period.

Early life

able objective – may well point to a mother the boy never felt able to satisfy, but that is pure speculation, and, of course, the three sons all turned out very differently.

Malcolm Hailey was precisely the sort of model recruit the Indian Civil Service strove to attract.⁶ His social origins reflected a common process in nineteenth-century Britain, the gentrification of the middle class. As a physician his father was a member of one of the first occupations to secure its professional status; although not gentry his mother's family was notable. He went to a good if not elite public school and he had a first-class Oxford degree. Entering the law or medicine would have required financial backing that his fatherless family did not possess. Both his class and education therefore pointed toward an administrative career, and although it posed risks to health, the ICS promised a high living standard, financial security, social respectability, and responsibility at an early age. A young man with his credentials could have gone into the home civil service. Like his brother, however, Malcolm chose India. Arriving in December 1894, he spent the first few months in the secretariat at Calcutta. He was then assigned to the Punjab, again to the secretariat.

Half a century later Lord Hailey tried to recall the frame of mind in which he had first gone out to India. After his retirement a few years earlier, he told a student group in 1939, unpacking books he had bought as a schoolboy had brought back his affection for Kipling and other writers on what had been called the imperial mission.⁷ In another talk to schoolboys at the end of the war he returned to the theme. In the 1890s, he reflected, Britons had been imperially minded only to a degree. What were later called the dominions were regarded with affection but not yet as a source of strength. India was therefore central and special. Although his young audience no doubt regarded Kipling as obsolete, he observed, the writer had fired the imagination; the belief in the white man's burden had been genuine. The Victorians might have been arrogant and ethnocentric, but their sense of duty and honor had been remarkable.⁸

If imperialism in Kipling's sense – mission, duty, honor – sums up the general attitude the young Malcolm Hailey carried to India in 1895, he was soon being indoctrinated into a more specific ideology, that of the Punjab tradition.⁹ Its origins were in the early 1850s, when a small group of men had come over to take charge of the territory just conquered from the Sikhs, containing some of India's best farmland, driest deserts, and bravest soldiers. Led by the Lawrence brothers – Henry a martyr of the Great Mutiny of 1857–8 and John a hero – their efforts to form a government over the vast territory, which included what later became the North-West Frontier Province, were rough and

⁶ See Bradford Spangenberg, *British Bureaucracy in India: Status, Policy, and the I.C.S. in the Late 19th Century* (Columbia, Mo.: South Asia Books, 1976).

⁷ 7 January 1939, Hailey Collection, HPA/334.

⁸ "The Empire," Abbotsholme School, 16 June 1945, HPA/336.

⁹ P.H.M. Van den Dungen, *The Punjab Tradition: Influence and Authority in Nineteenth-Century India* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1972).

Hailey: a study in British imperialism

makeshift. Like Sir Frederick Lugard and the indirect rulers in Northern Nigeria, however, the Punjab school made a virtue of their shortcomings.

With an enthusiasm that sometimes made it seem as though they might have invented the concepts, the Punjab school stressed authoritarianism and paternalism. Combining judicial, revenue, and administrative powers often separated in more established regimes, Punjab officials were instructed to act firmly at the first sign of trouble lest their notoriously turbulent peoples should explode in violence. Their decisions were supposed to be simple and direct, rough justice, consistent with the spirit of the law if not necessarily its letter. The ideal officer was not a desk man. He spent his days on horseback, at polo or pigsticking when not touring, carefully investigating complaints and making quick, commonsense decisions under a tree. In a province where agriculture was virtually the sole industry he was to gain and keep the loyalty of the landowning and peasant classes. The personal bond between the man on the spot and *his* people could not be overstressed. These, the millions of ordinary villagers, unlettered and unsophisticated, not the small minority of educated townspeople of Lahore, Amritsar, or Delhi, were the "real India." Identifying themselves rather arrogantly as the authentic spokesmen of the agrarian masses, British officials called themselves Punjabis.

Mediating among the three main religious communities – Muslim, Hindu, Sikh – civil servants must act impartially. For the province was a tinderbox where religious sparks might set off a raging conflagration at any time. The regime depended on the direct, personal influence of its officers. In the words of a John Lawrence biographer, "a unique truthfulness, simplicity, and singleness of purpose" characterized them. Doing their simple duty, seeking no favor, fearing no blame, "they loved the people . . . , put themselves in the people's place and made the interests of the people their own." The language of the Punjab school was unapologetically paternalist. As Lawrence's famous Hoshiarpur proclamation put it: "What is your injury I consider mine; what is gain to you I consider my gain; return to me, as children who have committed a fault return to the fathers, and their faults will be forgiven them."¹⁰

During 1857–8 the Punjab had played a crucial role. In Delhi, in the south-east corner of the province, most of the British were killed and the Mughal emperor was restored. In the western portion, however, support for the new masters held firm. As nationalist leaders would later pointedly remind them, it was the Punjab's so-called martial races who had enabled Britain to reconquer central and northern India. After the Great Rebellion the British had shifted their recruiting grounds from UP (then western Bengal) to the Punjab and Bombay presidency, adding further to the prestige of the Lawrence regime. By the 1860s the Punjab school was no longer merely a makeshift framework for the governance of a huge, backward, potentially troublesome province. Like Sir Frederick Lugard's later scheme of indirect rule in Northern Nigeria – with

¹⁰ Charles Aitchison, *Lord Lawrence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1892), pp. 59, 69.

Early life

which, although it was certainly not indirect, the Punjab tradition had much in common – it had become an ideology.

In 1961, reflecting on his governorship of the Punjab in the 1920s, Lord Hailey wrote that as a junior official he had been secretary and disciple of the financial commissioner, S. S. Thorburn. No one could make sense of that period, he stressed, without first understanding the origins of the Punjab Land Alienation Act of 1900.¹¹ This valuable clue needs to be followed up in detail.

During the last three decades of the nineteenth century and, as Hailey indicated, far beyond, one problem became the central preoccupation of Punjabi civil servants. It was peasant indebtedness. During the 1860s officers making revenue-settlement reports had noticed that large quantities of land seemed to be passing from their hereditary owners, mainly from the Rajput or Jat castes (or tribes) of all three religions, to Hindu moneylending castes. The complex problem appeared to be new and it seemed to be getting worse. Within the Punjab branch of the ICS, as well as among the provincial government, the central Government of India, and the India Office in London, the debate on the issue was long and intense. Was it after all any of the government's business?

According to the orthodox political economy of the period, which was especially favored in Calcutta or London although it also had exponents in Lahore, however unpleasant the effects might seem in the short run, natural economic processes should be left alone. From the free-trade perspective movement in the land market was not only inevitable but a sign of progress, reflecting the flow of badly needed capital into agriculture, consolidating holdings, increasing prosperity and security. If market forces were left alone then productivity would rise and profits would improve, attracting still more capital and replacing inefficient landowners. Developing the country was Britain's sacred duty. And that, the orthodox maintained, was precisely what was happening.

Gradually Punjab civil servants became converted to the opposite view. As Hailey noted the principal advocate of the interventionist doctrine was his mentor, Thorburn, the author of a sensationally written book, *Musalmans and Money-Lenders in the Punjab* (1886). "The Punjab is an agricultural province," the opening sentence asserted, "a land of peasant proprietors, a large and annually increasing portion of whom are sinking into the position of serfs to the money-lenders."¹² Because especially in the western part of the territory these peasant landowners were almost entirely Muslim, whereas the moneylending castes were Hindu, the problem was politically dangerous. Moreover, Thorburn charged, by creating a right in land that could be sold, and that could therefore be borrowed against, the British were responsible.

¹¹ Hailey to D. A. Low, 10 January 1961, HPI/51.

¹² Septimus S. Thorburn, *Musalmans and Money-Lenders in the Punjab* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1886), p. 1.

Hailey: a study in British imperialism

Before the British, Thorburn argued, the Punjab's agrarian economy had been conducted virtually without cash. Even the land revenue had ordinarily been paid in kind. Moneylenders had occupied relatively humble positions, making advances for seed or livestock for which they were paid in grain – but only if the harvest had been a good one. In this primitive economy the burden of indebtedness had been low. Moneylenders were unwilling to make large advances, even supposing they had been able, because above a relatively low level borrowers would be incapable of repaying them. Although Indian regimes might have seized a larger share of the crop, the consequence had not been rising indebtedness. Moreover, because the balance between peasants and moneylenders had been relatively even, religious conflict had remained minimal. Even in the mid-1880s, Thorburn testified, Muslim, Sikh, and Hindu landlords and peasants lived side by side “in happy indifference to the petty jealousies which superior knowledge stirs up in the hearts of their Hindu and Musalman brethren in the towns.”¹³

“The Bunniahs,” Thorburn sneered at Hindu moneylenders, “are men of miserable physique and no manliness of character,” much like Jews in Europe. Yet “Shylock was a gentleman by the side of Nand Lall Bunniah – as Shylock, though he spoiled the Gentiles, was yet a man of honor. Nand Lall has none, commercially speaking.”¹⁴ Greedy, shrewd, and ruthless, moneylenders hustled ignorant, thoughtless peasants into taking out mortgages to pay for weddings or funerals, subtracted discounts as high as 50 percent in advance, and then charged interest of 36 percent or so on the whole principal. Whereas earlier moneylenders had suffered along with their debtors, now they simply foreclosed. Borne down by debts they could never hope to repay, peasant and landlord families sank deep into peonage enduring unto the third and fourth generation.

Although the court system was one of the supposed benefits of British rule, Thorburn charged, it had tipped the balance decisively in favor of the moneylenders. Traditionally they had been constrained by the village community, in which they were essentially aliens. If they went beyond proper and reasonable bounds, their clients refused to pay or killed them. British law had taken off the brakes. Its most basic element was the contract, which presumed that creditor and debtor had entered freely into an equitable and binding agreement. In the circumstances of the Punjab, however, that was a ludicrous and tragic fiction. Hindu moneylenders had superior education, the shrewd business sense of their caste, larger financial resources, and the services of the largely Hindu bar. The legal profession was, of course, also available to peasants, who were urged forward in reckless suits foredoomed to fail – and the lawyers took their cut too. The odds might be better at Monte Carlo.

This was no simple matter of leaving economic laws to run their course, Thorburn pleaded. British rule having upset the fragile equilibrium of agrarian

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

Early life

society, it was up to the government to restore it. He called for legislation to prevent land passing from hereditary agricultural castes – in the Punjab they were usually called tribes – into the hands of nonagriculturist moneylenders. To be sure, peasants were also at fault. Although outsiders might call such intervention paternalist, however, “ignorant natives must be protected against the consequences of their own ignorance.” Otherwise the largely Muslim peasantry of the western Punjab, from which so large a portion of the Indian army came, would be ruined and antagonized. A prudent government that also claimed to be moral must guard the people’s welfare. And the Indian people, Thorburn concluded, in language characteristic of the Punjab school, “are the dumb toiling millions of peasants inhabiting the villages, hamlets, and scattered homesteads of the land. The town-bred exotics who are annually forced through in our educational hot-houses” had less claim to pose as “representatives of that people . . . than the puny operatives of our [English] manufacturing towns have of being typical specimens of John Bull.”¹⁵

The Punjab doctrine was appropriate, if at all, for a backward society, not for sophisticated presidency capitals like Calcutta or Bombay. By the 1890s, indeed, it no longer fitted the Punjab. In the province’s principal towns – Delhi, Lahore, Amritsar – students most of whom were Hindu were entering mission schools and universities. Already the government was carefully monitoring a lively English-language and vernacular press. An important Hindu reform movement with a sharp political edge, the Arya Samaj, was well under way.¹⁶ Urban Hindus perceived the Land Alienation bill as part of a discriminatory package that included quotas for each community for appointments to government jobs. The British, they concluded, were threatening their very economic and political survival. Government officials responded that they were simply being evenhanded, attempting to correct a dangerous imbalance. By the first decade of the twentieth century the lines of communal conflict that would ultimately lead to the tragedy of partition in 1947 were already being drawn.

The Punjab Land Alienation Act of 1900 designated agricultural and non-agricultural tribes, prohibiting the latter from acquiring agricultural land in satisfaction of unpaid debt. Although the Punjab government overrode the strenuous and to some extent well-founded Hindu and official opposition, the law had several defects. First, as even the *Punjab Settlement Manual* admitted, the list of approved tribes was really not all that practical, for many people whose caste names were not on the approved list were in fact hereditary agriculturists.¹⁷ Second, if mortgages on land could not be foreclosed, then either the debt would be moved over to crops, livestock, or farm implements, or capital would dry up. Third, the act did not prohibit land from being alienated to agricultural capitalists, mainly Rajputs, who were not hereditary moneylenders.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 54.

¹⁶ See Kenneth W. Jones, *Arya Dharm: Hindu Consciousness in 19th-Century Punjab* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

¹⁷ James M. Douie, *Punjab Settlement Manual*, 5th ed. (Lahore: Government Printer, 1961), p. 199.

Hailey: a study in British imperialism

As Malcolm Darling explained in his classic study, if there was one thing worse than caste moneylenders, it was the new agricultural-capitalist class created by the act of 1900.¹⁸

The Punjab school was far from monolithic. Like any successful ideology it provided room for maneuver and disagreement. It contained men like Sir Denzil Ibbetson, who as lieutenant governor presided over the government's panicked response to the canal-colony tax revolt of 1907, and Sir Michael O'Dwyer, the authoritarian, heavyhanded ruler who imposed martial law in 1919. But it also included Malcolm Darling, whose travel journals reveal profound sympathy and insight into the lives of ordinary peasants; F. L. Brayne, the champion of village uplift; and Herbert Emerson, who was so strikingly successful in negotiating with Gandhi in 1931. Although it was of course politically biased, helping the government combat the claims of nationalist leaders to represent all of India, the strong identification of Punjab officials with the interests of rural people was not entirely hypocritical. Moreover, with rather more to show for their efforts than Joseph Chamberlain's contemporary doctrine of undeveloped estates in tropical Africa, the members of the Punjab school were pioneers in the evolution of a powerful imperial ideology: colonial development.

Although it is doubtful whether Malcolm Hailey ever went in for pigsticking, in most respects he was an authentic and wholehearted member of the Punjab school. On leave in London in 1912, for instance, he spoke at a meeting of old Punjaubis, as he spelled it. He told his retired colleagues how much had changed: the canal colonies had opened up thriving new agricultural areas; towns were growing in sophistication and political consciousness; the recent selection of Delhi as the new capital of the Government of India would add to the province's importance. Perhaps the Punjab might gain Karachi in compensation, he suggested, as though he were speaking of a sovereign state. The idea appealed "to the imagination: the Punjaub stretching from the Himalayas to the sea, mistress of her own port, and controlling the whole line of the Indus with all its vast possibilities for irrigation."

The speaker turned to what was called the peasant's Magna Carta, Thorburn's brainchild, the Land Alienation Act. Although it had its critics, Hailey conceded, it had been "a great moral gain. The member of an agricultural tribe has now an increased interest in thrift, and his character has gained from the improvement and stability of his position." He extolled the Punjab peasant: keen, industrious, firmly attached to the land, and driven to get his share of it. "We all know what he has done in the Army," he concluded; "we know the character which he has earned throughout the East wherever his enterprising disposition has carried him."¹⁹ The self-proclaimed disciple of S. S. Thorburn had learned his lesson well. Half a century later, during World War II, Lord Hailey would be a leading spokesman for the colonial reform movement, which

¹⁸ Malcolm Darling, *The Punjab Peasant in Prosperity and Debt* (1925; New Delhi: Manohar, 1977), pp. 197-9.

¹⁹ Transcript in HPA/338.

Early life

in many ways was a natural extension of the Punjab tradition.²⁰ More specifically, as chairman of a Colonial Office committee on land tenure, he would attempt to export into Africa his mentor's doctrine on peasant indebtedness.



In 1896, at twenty-four, which was young for Indian Civil Servants, Hailey had married Andreina (Alexandra) Balzani, the daughter of a Roman count. Disappointingly little information is available, even including how they met. Evidently a woman of spirit and independence, she was described as slim and beautiful, athletic and musical, with glorious hair.²¹ But she was both a foreigner and a Catholic, and it was therefore she who had to make most of the adjustments. In 1900 she bore their first child, a son named Alan Balzani, whom they called Billy.

At the turn of the new century Malcolm Hailey was twenty-eight. At over six feet he was as tall as most Punjab soldiers, his large hawk's nose made him stern and still more commanding, and his hair was already receding. His formal education and his apprenticeship were behind him. He had come from the middle-class background typical of the Indian Civil Service. The classical studies in which he had distinguished himself at Oxford were precisely the generalist education the service's recruiters believed most appropriate. During his first years in India he had learned his languages. He and Alexandra Hailey had acclimatized themselves to the Punjab: the cool and pleasant winters, the notorious hot weather that only the secretariat was fortunate enough to leave behind in the annual trek to the summer capital at Simla, the wet season that brought diseases as well as relief from the heat. He had already contracted malaria, from which he would suffer periodically the rest of his life. He had done his work with enough competence and flair to catch the eye of his superiors. He had been indoctrinated generally into the creed of the British imperial mission and specifically into the Punjab tradition.

The truly formative period lay just ahead. In November 1901 Hailey was appointed the first colonization officer of the Lower Jhelum Canal Colony, where he would serve through 1906. In the interim, which was so brief that it was not even recorded in the *India Office Lists*, he went on special assignment to the western Punjab district of Dera Ismail Khan. I might have overlooked it too, except that some sixty years later when he was arranging his papers for deposit in the India Office Library he asked a former client to retrieve from a district record office in Pakistan what might seem to be an obscure document. It is a settlement (revenue-assessment) report on the district's Thal tract. As Lord Hailey himself obviously realized, it provides a valuable insight into his mind and personality on the eve of his first important assignment.

²⁰ I have benefited from a conversation with D. Anthony Low on this point.

²¹ Letter in the *Times*, 2 February 1939, after her death.

Hailey: a study in British imperialism

Although he wrote sympathetically and even powerfully, the form of the report was of course prescribed. The detailed studies of Indian districts – local history, anthropology, demography, analysis of agriculture, and so on – embodied in settlement reports and gazetteers are among the ICS's most valuable and enduring contributions. Comparable to lawyers' briefs or scholars' monographs, they were professionally significant, being published by government printers and carefully reviewed by revenue commissioners as a basis for promotion. Some reports – for example, Denzil Ibbetson's of Karnal, or James Wilson's of Shahpur, both in the Punjab – became classics. Possessing a jargon and a specified format they were also a sort of cult, part of the ICS lore.

Yet the subject of the settlement reports was intensely serious. Although the government levied income, sales, and customs duties, as well as the salt tax that Gandhi would select as his symbolic target in 1930, the land revenue was the primary direct levy on the mass of India's people, in many cases one of the state's few significant intrusions into their daily lives. The settlement report was also a record of rights, sorting out landlord–tenant relations tract by tract. It was an article of faith that the land revenue was a stimulus to thrift and industry rather than a cause of poverty. If an assessment were too high, however, it could create hardship, famine, and unrest; if too low, the public would be robbed of important state services. An admittedly sloppy settlement in the Bardoli district of Bombay presidency would provide an opening for an important tax strike in the late 1920s. The settlement officer's investigations put his finger on the pulse of village India.

It would be hard to imagine an area more desolate than the Thal, Hailey reported, "barren and lifeless, devoid not only of bird and animal life, but almost of vegetation." In the north scanty rainfall provided scanty pasturage for Pathan herders. In the south, where a few Hindu-dominated villages struggled to live from cultivation, well water was so salty that it was often undrinkable. Even the best land needed manuring. Because cow dung was often the only available source of fuel, however, it was at a premium, often being bartered for well privileges that were even more precious. Water levels were sixty feet or more beneath the surface. Well digging was therefore a highly respected art and complex rules governed access: "The maintenance of a Thal well involves as much labour and nicety as its construction."

The chief characteristic of this intricate, fragile ecology of desert and semi-desert zones was poverty, "a poverty not only of resources but also of enterprise and intelligence. A continual struggle with Nature in her most niggard and capricious mood leaves them too exhausted for any other effort." Unlike other hard-pressed Punjab peasants, men from the Thal did not join the army, which would have brought them income. Aptly they described themselves as camel-hearted, "for they have to undertake an immense amount of the dullest kind of labour on the poorest of diets, and for the meanest of rewards." Comparatively energetic and farsighted, the well owner stood at the apex of society, parceling out the scarce water according to complex rules. Even he had little grain,

Early life

surviving most of the year on turnips, melons, and wild fruit. Although pastoralists ate less grain, they did get a good deal of meat, “for besides the food afforded by an institution resembling a mutton club, they never hesitate to use the knife on an animal dying of disease, be it bullock, goat, or . . . camel.” There were some compensations. Spared the fevers of moister regions the people were comparatively healthy, “and the age of their men and the strength of their women are a bye word in the district. Indeed, it is the poverty of poor living only, for there is never any actual famine, and in the worst of times temporary migration is no hardship to a half nomadic people.” They grew them tough in the Thal: “How arduous the lives of these people must be, only those who have experience of the scorching sun and devastating sand storms . . . can realize.”²²

The standard form for such reports called for a historical section. Unfortunately, however, not much was known. According to local tradition the first occupiers had been a half-mythical people, the Belemas, whose huge bones and clay pots were still said to be found beneath the sand. The great invading tribes – Jats, Rajputs – had passed through, and the remains of a sizable ancient town had been found. All these invaders had moved on to better agricultural regions, leaving the Thal to pastoralists and struggling cultivators. Although the Mughals had declared their sovereignty over the area, it had little to attract them; apart from a few irregularly collected taxes in kind they had largely left it alone. The Mughals might have been right, the young settlement officer may have reflected. Like the Roman empire, however, the Government of India had decreed that all its subjects must be taxed. A light assessment would accustom the people to authority, Hailey concluded. It might even help to cure their camel-hearted stoicism.

Arriving at a practical and defensible tax was difficult. Laboriously Hailey compiled price tables, the trouble being that fluctuations resulting from capricious rain and undependable wells were so wide that averages were meaningless. The fact that there were virtually no rents ruled out the common method of claiming a percentage for the state, turning landlords into tax collectors. Water was the only commodity for which payments were made regularly either in cash or in kind, so Hailey proposed a tax on well owners' collections. But even that was complicated, for wells fluctuated almost as widely as crops: a well that seemed inexhaustible one year might fail completely the next. Someone would therefore have to go round frequently to check water flows. Hailey also recommended a light fluctuating assessment on agricultural and grazing land, to be collected in cash from the users. Because the standard work, Douie's *Settlement Manual* (1899), declared that assessments should ordinarily stand for twenty to thirty years – the debate between the advocates of fixed and periodically adjusted evaluations went back at least to Cornwallis's permanent set-

²² “Assessment Report of the Thal Tract of the Dera Ismail Khan District,” submitted September 1902, HPI/52B.

Hailey: a study in British imperialism

tlement of the 1790s in Bengal – Hailey had to defend his proposal. Only a heartless and unintelligent government would insist on an inflexible rate, he argued, when all else in the Thal was so completely at the mercy of a harsh and capricious nature. It would cause more trouble for the deputy commissioner (as district officers were called in the Punjab). But a light, flexible tax seemed the only way.

The report earned high marks. Its proposals were “characterized by good sense and intelligent sympathy for the people in the hard life they lead,” wrote the settlement commissioner, James Wilson. The financial commissioner, Sir Lewis Tupper, thought the “description of the vegetation of the Thal, its physical characteristics, the conditions of life there, and the systems of agriculture and grazing ranks with the best descriptions of the kind . . . in Punjab Settlement literature.”²³

If Malcolm Hailey had not been a high flyer, if he had spent his career as an ordinary Punjab district officer, he would have written many other reports like the one on the Thal. Because he spent most of his career in high administrative positions, however, he would do little sustained analytical inquiry. Indeed, the next time he would set out to do a comparable research project would be in 1936. Then the scale would be not part of a district but most of a continent: the *African Survey*.

²³ Comments on settlement report, *ibid*.